

VZCZCXRO1826
OO RUEHAG RUEHROV
DE RUEHHT #1411/01 2830437
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 090437Z OCT 08
FM AMEMBASSY ATHENS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 2607
INFO RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RHMFSS/HQ EPA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ATHENS 001411

SIPDIS

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OES/PCI FOR FITE/HUDAK, OES/EGC FOR FENDLEY

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/08/2018

TAGS: KHKG EAGR SENV ENRG TRGY GR

SUBJECT: ENVIRONMENTALISTS FIGHT THE GOOD FIGHT IN GREECE
ON MARINE PROTECTION AND CLIMATE CHANGE

REF: A. ATHENS 01350
B. ATHENS 00851

Classified By: Ambassador Daniel Speckhard for Reasons 1.4 (b,d)

¶1. (C) Summary: As part of the Embassy's initiative to expand its dialogue on the environment, the Ambassador hosted a September 23 lunch for Greek NGO environmentalists. A key point raised included the challenges of protecting the environment against big business interests, such as tourism and shipping. The group discussed positive U.S.-Greek efforts on disaster relief in fighting wildfires. Attendees included: Christos Zerefos and Alcibiades Bais, who were singled out for their contributions to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which shared the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize with former Vice-President Al Gore. Other attendees included representatives from Elliniki Etairia (Society for the Environment and Cultural Heritage) and Hellenic Marine Environment Protection Association(HELMEPA). One invitee, who was unable to attend the luncheon, met separately with EconOff and blamed internal Government of Greece (GoG) politics for impeding progress on climate change. End Summary.

Fighting the Big Fish

¶2. (C) As part of outreach efforts to build cooperation with NGO environmentalists, the Ambassador hosted a September 23 luncheon. Greek NGO participants shared their perspectives on how hard it is to protect the environment in Greece, particularly when they must compete with powerful business interests who have the ear of the GoG. The head of HELMEPA Dimitris Mitsatsos said that tourism operators frequently lobbied the GoG on environmental issues. He further added that Greek politicians, who in many cases had their own conflicting tourism interests, pressured various NGOs, including the Hellenic Society for the Protection of Nature (HSPN), to reduce the number of environmental criteria for beaches and marinas. This contributed to Greece being awarded 430 blue flags, an award given to the most ecologically-friendly beaches. This places Greece at a number 2 ranking on a list of forty nations and is in part due to the lower criteria to get a blue flag.

Protecting the Little Fish

¶3. (C) Mitsatsos opined that the GoG faced domestic political pressures which often superseded environmental concerns. For example, Greenpeace reported that most fish species in Greece are severely overfished, despite EU and national regulations on minimum sizes and types of commercial species. Mitsatsos added that he was impressed in a recent visit to California where they imposed strict regulations for businesses operating on the coastline. Zerefos suggested that Greece with 15,400 km of coastline could learn from such places and exchange information on how to respond to climate changes to protect not only its marine environments, but to respond to natural disasters such as the fires that ravaged both Greece and California.

U...Greek Fire Cooperation

¶4. (C) Despite outside assistance and high-level attention following last year's devastating wildfire season, the GoG continues to face challenges in coordinating an effective response to the wildfire situation. (Post will report in an end-of-fire season septel). In response to queries by the attendees at the lunch, the Ambassador highlighted the solid bilateral cooperation on USG-funded training and exchanges facilitated by USAID and the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) to target the needs of the Greek participants. He added that five Greek firefighters from the Hellenic Fire Service, in turn, had recently traveled from Greece to assist California in fighting its wildfires during the difficult fire season.

Internal Fisticuffs over Climate Change

¶5. (C) Movement by GoG on climate change is likely to remain slow, according to the founder of the Center of Renewable

Energy Sources (CRES) Dimitris Lalas. He told EconOff in a September 29 meeting that internal Greek politics were to blame for Greece's censure in May by the EU for failing to maintain a proper national system to record greenhouse gas

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emissions, key to compliance with the Kyoto Protocol. Lalas explained that his contract to manage the national inventory of emissions ended in April 2007. He blamed the GoG for failing to appoint "five warm bodies" to take over the national inventory. As a result, Greece was cited in breach of its Kyoto Protocol requirements in April 2008. Lalas stressed that party politics and bureaucracy were to blame for a situation that could easily have been avoided.

16. (C) According to Lalas, Minister of Environment and Public Works Giorgos Souflis was given the incorrect information to release to the public by his Deputy Minister Stavros Kalogiannis in an attempt to hide any wrong-doing by the present party in power on climate change. Further, Lalas believes that the wrong measurements were issued to shift blame onto the previous party in power. In spite of the current political scandals weakening the GoG, Lalas notes that Souflis continues to hold a significant amount of power in Karamanlis' Cabinet and remains one of his key advisors.

Comment

17. (C) Although the GoG is slow to move on environmental issues, it is aware that it needs to meet EU and Kyoto Protocol obligations. We are seeing a GoG that is focused on renewables with pending legislation to ease licensing procedures and provide new financial incentives for investors; however, given Greece's current political climate, it is likely that concrete action on the environment will be further delayed. Post will continue to engage with the GoG and the NGO community as part of its ongoing efforts to expand dialogue on environmental issues. End Comment.

SPECKHARD